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Celebrating Policy Change: SNAP access streamlined for 1M+ Michiganders

By: **Caiti Roth-Eisenberg**, Senior Policy Manager

I could not be more excited that the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) recently expanded the use of a policy called "simplified reporting" for the vast majority of its participants in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), also called the Food Assistance Program (FAP) in Michigan. This common-sense policy simplifies the rules for when SNAP participants need to report changes in their household income and circumstances – and when combined with related process changes, will make it significantly easier for more than 1 million eligible Michigan residents to continue receiving SNAP.

Without simplified reporting, SNAP participants need to follow complicated rules to report even minor fluctuations in their income – such as working extra shifts – and other household circumstances within 10 days of when the change occurred – or else risk closure or reduction of their benefits. With simplified reporting, most changes instead need to be reported about every six months in a semi-annual report or during recertification. Reducing these burdensome requirements for SNAP participants simultaneously reduces the amount of paperwork state workers must process and has been shown to improve payment error rates.

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In July 2023, MDHHS began implementing several recommendations developed by Benefits Data Trust (BDT) to expand simplified reporting to approximately 93 percent of all SNAP households in Michigan, in line with best practices in place in the majority of states nationwide. This policy change, combined with process improvements, will streamline access to SNAP for about 1.2 million people when it is fully rolled out.

This expansion is significant. In 2020, only about 30 percent of Michigan SNAP participants were able to take advantage of simplified reporting. With encouragement from the U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), MDHHS saw that expanding simplified reporting to more people would be an opportunity to improve payment accuracy while preserving people's access to SNAP. Being forward-thinking, MDHHS was also interested in exploring how to automate report processing so that local office specialists could focus on the complex cases that need their attention.

However, MDHHS needed additional capacity to thoroughly research the many options – not just what to do, but how best to do it. That's where BDT came in.

My colleagues and I on the BDT Policy Team gathered the information MDHHS would need to inform this big change: conducting interviews with other states and policy experts, reviewing the available literature, and analyzing SNAP policy manuals in all 50 states plus Washington, D.C.

We compiled a comprehensive set of recommendations based on the promising practices we uncovered – everything from policy decisions, back-end processing, client notifications, staff training and support, and evaluation to understand what works.

States and policymakers alike know that policy work often takes time, reflected in the case of Michigan, which took several years to enact. The MDHHS team deserves huge congratulations for advancing expanded simplified reporting amid all of the competing priorities and shifting terrain brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath. Making a big change like this – and carefully planning the transition – is no easy task.

It is truly an honor to have had the opportunity to work alongside MDHHS through this effort. Ultimately, this policy change and the process improvements that come with it will help MDHHS operate more efficiently, with greater payment accuracy, while ensuring eligible Michiganders can more easily continue receiving critical food assistance – a win all around.

Benefits Data Trust is a nonprofit with nearly 20 years of experience helping states nationwide modernize policies. To learn more about our policy work, contact Caiti Roth-Eisenberg at croth-eisenberg@bdtrust.org

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